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14. ABSTRACT Latin America has historically been a region of instability and turmoil. It is known for institutional corruption, weak economies, abject poverty, extensive underemployment as well as unemployment, overpopulation, social discord, non-democratic governments, military involvement in civil affairs, human rights abuses, weapons proliferation, drug cartels and narco-terrorism. Additionally, Colombia's continued insurgency significantly exasperates the situation. The arrival of Islamic extremists and transnational terrorists can only increase the problems of the region and directly threaten the security of the United States as well as America's partners. The presence of militant extremist groups like Hamas, Hizballah and al-Qaida in the triborder area (TBA) of Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil is a matter of serious concern. The Combatant Commander's TSCSG is a theater strategic planning document that is key in shaping, responding and preparing the region for security cooperation and peacetime engagement. Does US Southern Command's (USSC) FY03-05 TSCSG sufficiently address and mitigate the growing threat posed by terrorists and terrorist organizations resident in USSC's Area of Responsibility (AOR)?					
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**LATIN AMERICA: CLOSE THE BACK DOOR!**

Does United States Southern Command's (USSC) FY03-05 Theater Security Cooperation Strategic Guidance (TSCSG) sufficiently address and mitigate the growing threat posed by terrorists and terrorist organizations resident in USSC's Area of Responsibility (AOR)?

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Maritime Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

16 May 2003

## **Introduction**

September 11, 2001, was not America's baptism to terrorism or even the first attack on New York City's financial district. The first attack occurred September 16, 1920, when anarchists exploded a horse cart filled with dynamite near the intersections of Wall and Broad Streets, taking 40 lives and wounding about 300 others.<sup>1</sup> However, the devastating attacks on the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon staggered the Western Hemisphere. The security of the world's most powerful nation was breached, provoking a sentiment that these attacks may have been prevented if we had been more proactive. Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida network were quickly discovered to be the perpetrators of these reprehensible attacks, combating terrorism and securing the U.S. homeland from future attacks became our top priorities. Since the fall of Afghanistan al-Qaida networks and operatives have been on the run, seeking new sanctuaries where they can plan and launch attacks against the U.S. A renewed anxiety has surfaced concerning the possibility that Latin America, because of its lax security environment and proximity to the U.S., could become the new destination of transnational terrorists' organizations; seeking a safe haven and support for their war against America.

Latin America has historically been a region of instability and turmoil. It is known for institutional corruption, weak economies, abject poverty, extensive underemployment as well as unemployment, overpopulation, social discord, non-democratic governments, military involvement in civil affairs, human rights abuses, weapons proliferation, drug cartels and narco-terrorism. Additionally, Colombia's continued insurgency significantly exasperates the situation. The arrival of Islamic extremists and transnational terrorists can only increase the problems of the region and directly threaten the security of the United States as well as

America's partners. Terrorist organizations like al-Qaida are dedicated to procuring weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Specifically, al-Qaida efforts have "been linked to the production of the chemical VX in Sudan and the production of the biological agent ricin. On several occasions the group has tried to obtain enriched uranium."<sup>2</sup>

### **Background and Situation**

As a candidate President Bush indicated he planned to take a tougher and more aggressive line in Latin America, targeting nationalists regarded as opponents of American economic and political interests, including the leaders of Venezuela and Haiti as well as the traditional bogeyman of US imperialism, Cuban President Fidel Castro.<sup>3</sup> Castro sponsors terrorism in Latin America and has since the 1950's. The State Department placed Cuba on its list of states that sponsor terrorism in 1982, citing Fidel Castro's training and arming of communist rebels in Africa and Latin America. President Hugo Chavez in Venezuela has undercut "American foreign policy by providing oil to Cuba, by opposing 'Plan Colombia,' which includes \$1.3 billion in United States counternarcotics aid for South America, and by giving political support to guerrillas and anti-government forces in neighboring Andean nations."<sup>4</sup> Colombia's three major narco-terrorist organizations are: the Colombian Armed Revolutionary Forces (FARC), with an estimated strength of 12,000 to 18,000 personnel; the National Liberation Army (ELN) with an estimated membership at 3,000 to 6,000 personnel; and the Colombian Self-defense Association (AUC), with an estimated strength of 10,000 members. All three terrorist groups are trained, capable and have well established and documented relationships with Colombia's drug cartels.<sup>5</sup>

On February 13, 2003 a US Cessna 208, with four US citizens on board, was carrying out a United States Southern Command (USSC) intelligence mission over the southern province

of Caquetá in Colombia. The aircraft suffered engine trouble and crash-landed in a clearing amid the jungle and in a FARC stronghold. One U.S. citizen was executed and three were taken prisoner. President Bush, in an interview on US television with the Spanish-Language Network, did not mince his words with regard to the FARC. He said: "One man had a bullet hole in the back of his head - clearly an execution. We are dealing with cold-blooded killers that need to be treated as cold-blooded killers."<sup>6</sup>

State sponsored and national terrorism throughout Latin America has been a continuous problem during the last 35 to 40 years. Revolutionary movements with communist connections as well as civil wars have been prevalent in the region touching every country in the USSC AOR. Latin American countries have struggled with domestic sources of terrorism for decades. International terrorist groups, moreover, have not hesitated to make Latin America a battleground to advance their causes elsewhere. The bombings of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992 and the Argentine-Jewish Cultural Center in 1994 are two well-known examples.<sup>7</sup>

The Department of State's 2002 "Patterns for Global Terrorism" report released in April 2003 indicates there were 50 international terror attacks in Latin America in 2002, second only to Asia's 99 attacks.<sup>8</sup> These events coupled with the absence of sound economic policies, institutional corruption and a lack of effective sovereignty make this region prime for networks such as al-Qaida along with other terrorists groups seeking a location to operate from with minimum risk of detection or governmental interference.

The presence of militant extremist groups like Hamas, Hizballah and al-Qaida in the triborder area (TBA) of Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil is a matter of serious concern. The TBA - where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay converge - has long been characterized as a

regional hub for Hizballah and Hamas fundraising activities. It is also used for arms and drug trafficking, contraband smuggling, document and currency fraud, money laundering, and the manufacture and movement of pirated goods. In November of 2002 it was reported by CNN that al-Qaida and other Islamic terrorist groups had allegedly met in Paraguay to conduct planning for future operations. Additionally, the local Paraguayan press reported that terrorist groups had set up training camps in the area.<sup>9</sup>

It is estimated that over six million people of Muslim decent are scattered throughout Latin America. “Muslim communities are found in Venezuela, Colombia, Chile, Peru, Honduras and Bolivia.”<sup>10</sup> “Antiterrorism experts say extremists cells tied to Hizballah, Islamic Jihad and Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda network are operating in Argentina, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Uruguay.”<sup>11</sup> A large and growing population of Muslims allows Islamic extremists and al-Qaida members to blend in and disappear within their communities. Moreover, this permits them the opportunity to conduct terrorist functions such as reconstitution, recruiting, training, planning of future operations and fund raising to support their operations.

The war on drugs in Colombia has been an unmitigated failure: drugs are now available in greater quantities and more cheaply than ever before. According to sources from the UN International Drug Control Program in Bogota, there was a small drop in cocaine supply in Colombia in the last year. However, this was more due to a drop in demand in favor of synthetic drugs in the U.S. than the result of interdiction or the US-sponsored drug eradication program in Colombia. U.S. efforts to interdict drugs prior to and after their entry into U.S. territory have been impotent. If transnational terrorist organizations such as al-

Qaida could exploit these same networks to gain access to the U.S., the results could be catastrophic.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Nexus**

The common link or nexus between narco-terrorism, drug traffickers and transnational terrorist groups like al-Qaida is funding as substantial fiscal resources are required to finance their operations. Both the Department of State (DOS) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) have reported that a coactive relationship exists between the drug cartels of Colombia, the FARC, ELN and AUC.

These relationships are the key linkage between terrorist organizations and drugs in Latin America. “While the activities of the two entities do not always follow the same course, we know that drugs and terror frequently share the common ground of geography, money and violence.”<sup>13</sup> Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida network, according to Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) sources were involved in the financing and facilitating of illegal drug activities in Afghanistan during the era of the Taliban regime. Afghanistan “produced and exported over 70% of the world’s opium.”<sup>14</sup> Al-Qaida’s past involvement with the drug trade demonstrates a knowledge, understanding of the trade and the financial benefits derived from it. The drug trade provides al-Qaida with a reasonable course of action to pursue, if the right circumstances and opportunities become available.

Passiveness and a failure to take preventive measures in our backyard will lead to failure in a region that is a vital national interest. The National Security Strategy (NSS) calls for a forward-reaching, pre-emptive strategy against hostile states and terrorist groups. The NSS states as part of our proactive counterproliferation efforts (pg. 14) that “we must deter and defend against the threat before it is unleashed”, and further goes on to emphasize the US has



always maintained the option of preemptive action with “the greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction” (pg. 15). Although, the U.S. has reacted to events in Latin America over the years, it may now be necessary to significantly increase our efforts and adopt a preemptive policy.

### **USSOUTHCOM’S FY03-05 Theater Security Cooperation Strategic Guidance (TSCSG)**

Does USSC’s FY03-05 TSCSG sufficiently address and mitigate the growing threat posed by terrorists and terrorist organizations resident in USSC’s Area of Responsibility (AOR)? The Combatant Commander’s TSCSG is a theater strategic planning document that is absolutely key in shaping, responding and preparing the region for security cooperation and peacetime engagement. However, recent events indicate that the War on Terrorism (WOT) requires a deliberate and specified strategy to combat transnational threats such as al-Qaida and other terrorist groups. As the al-Qaida network demonstrates, the terrorist threat today is mutating into something quite different from its predecessors.

After analyzing the TSCSG, the author will argue that there should be a separate TSCSG annex specifically dedicated to the defeat of transnational terrorist groups like al-Qaida. A separate annex in the TSCSG would give priority to containing, defeating and eventually deterring terrorist organizations from operating in the SC AOR. By eliminating transnational threats posed by al-Qaida and similar terrorist organizations resident in the SC AOR, the security of the U.S. homeland will therefore be enhanced.

The principle challenge that militant Muslim extremists groups such as al-Qaida, Hamas and Hizballah present for the U.S., Latin America and USSC is how to isolate, contain, defeat and then deter them from operating in USSC’s AOR. USSC’s strategy, outlined in the TSCSG document, is designed to shape, respond and prepare the Combatant

Commander's theater, during peacetime. It is fashioned from guidance provided by the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) who dictates goals for the Combatant Commanders at both the global and regional levels. The TSCSG as currently written is focused on security cooperation and is designed to strengthen regional partnerships, provide regional stability, gain access for U.S. forces to the theater, and facilitate the response capability of U.S. forces to crisis situations.<sup>15</sup>

Theater cooperation activities that support the Combatant Commander's objectives in maintaining regional stability with America's partners include the following; counterdrug support, combined exercises, combined training, combined education, mil-to-mil contacts, security assistance, humanitarian assistance and intelligence support.<sup>16</sup> These activities are designed to enhance regional partner capabilities while deterring both regional and global adversaries. Historically, USSC has been considered successful in achieving their strategic objectives. However, as we know there has been a shift in the national priorities, but has that shift been incorporated into USSC's TSCSG and furthermore can the TSCSG as currently presented successfully mitigate the growing threat posed by al-Qaida and other terrorists groups in Latin America? After examining the TSCSG the answer appears to be no. The War on Terrorism requires a different approach due to the demonstrated lethality and commitment that Muslim extremists have demonstrated. Al-Qaida has proven to be a capable and well-structured adversary. USSC needs to develop an independent strategy that supplements the current TSCSG and is developed to specifically address the growing terrorist threat in the region.

Prior to September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, USSC's resources and assets were dedicated almost exclusively to counterdrug efforts in the region. The WOT, as in all theaters, has since been

designated the number one priority. USSC's strategy, predicated on fighting drugs, must now make a transition that correctly allocates its constrained resources from drug interdiction to combating terrorism. In fact, due to an OSD reallocation of previously assigned USSC assets to other theaters to support Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom this transition becomes even more critical.

In the process of developing a strategy that would specifically target terrorist organizations in the region, USSC needs to ensure that its strategy and plans make a distinction between transnational terrorism and narco-terrorism in order to effectively prioritize their limited resources. Though on the surface it may appear that both types of terrorism can be grouped together, it is important to differentiate between the two in order to develop and implement a strategy to adequately addresses both. Transnational terrorism is clearly more dangerous to the region and its elimination should be assigned first priority. Additionally, although there are many similar methodologies shared by both, there are also distinct differences that require a separate strategy to be developed and implemented for each.

The most profound and alarming difference between transnational terrorist organizations like al-Qaida and narco-terrorist groups, such as the FARC, is their objectives. One principal objective of militant Islamic extremists is to kill as many Americans as possible wherever they can be found.<sup>17</sup> The strategic objective for narco-terrorist groups like the FARC is the violent overthrow of Colombia's legitimate government. The FARC's efforts are funded by the narcotics trade.

The U. S. short-term response to narco-terrorism in Colombia is the \$1.3 billion counterdrug support package called Plan Colombia. This plan's intent is to demonstrate U.S.

resolve, commitment and to provide a strategy to direct Counterdrug efforts. A similar strategy for the defeat of terrorism in USSC's AOR is also required. The difficulties and unique challenges required to successfully defeat narco-terrorism and transnational terrorism, as two separate entities, would ultimately determine the success of USSC's strategy and its contribution to the security of the U.S. homeland.

Currently, "ten of 30 terrorist organizations operating worldwide, including one linked to Osama bin Laden, are located or operate in Latin America. So far, most of their violence has been directed within the region, but it could easily migrate to the United States."<sup>18</sup> There are two principal regions in Latin America where narco-terrorism and transnational terrorists have become identified and have established residence. Colombia is one and the TBA of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay is the other.

### **Analysis**

In the absence of a clearly defined and pointed preemptive strategy to address transnational terrorism in USSC's FY03-05 TSCSG, the following scenarios are presented to illustrate the danger of a possible nexus between the drug cartels, the narco-terrorist presence in Colombia and militant Muslim extremists groups such as al-Qaida, Hamas and Hizballah present in Latin America. The scope, size and foothold of al-Qaida networks in the region are yet to be determined, which makes targeting them even more difficult.

The thought of al-Qaida establishing contacts with drug cartels in Colombia or with other subversive elements within the region is a real possibility. As the U.S. continues to increase pressure on Latin American insurgents, these organizations may find that a coalition or alliance would be advantageous in dissuading or disrupting the U.S. unity of effort in pursuing them. Such an arrangement would occur based on mutual interests and benefits that

each organization could provide for the other. Revenue from the drug trafficking could obviously provide each organization the logistical support required to fund their operations. The FARC remains well connected with other terrorist organizations in Latin America and there is precedence for them establishing contacts with international organizations. The most disturbing have been the international support and training the FARC received from Spain's Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA) separatist movement and the training, in Colombia, on Improvised Explosive Devices (IED's) provided by the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

In return for support, al-Qaida could provide terrorist training to the FARC, ELN, AUC or other insurgents as well as to drug cartel members. The additional incentive for al-Qaida to join forces and create a coalition with narco-terrorists is the attractiveness of the networks used by the cartels to export their products worldwide. As pointed out earlier, access to such networks would be a road to victory for transnational terrorists. Exploitation of these networks would allow al-Qaida and other terrorists the ability to gain entry to the U.S., undetected, to conduct attacks or to coordinate activities with terrorist cells already in place.

History has shown that America's vast borders and shorelines are critical weaknesses that increase our vulnerability to attacks by transnational terrorists. During 2000, "489 million people, 127 million cars, 11.6 million maritime containers, 11.5 million trucks, 2.2 million railroad cars, 829,000 planes and 211,000 boats passed through U.S. border inspections..."<sup>19</sup> This does not mean that each of these items was inspected, only that they were recorded by the appropriate agencies as having entered into the U.S. It does not account for all the illegal cargo and immigrants that entered the U.S.

Recently MSNBC reported al-Qaida networks had acquired a fleet of 15 cargo ships that transit throughout the globe.<sup>20</sup> The possibility exists that a militant Islamic group such as al-Qaida could attack a U.S. sea port or an island in the Caribbean with WMD, where security is extremely lacking. Another possible scenario is for al-Qaida to conduct attacks at popular resorts frequented by Americans in places like Cancun, Mexico or one of numerous tourist destinations in the Caribbean. As U.S. homeland defense becomes stronger these locations may move to the top of the terrorist's target list.

### **Relevance to the Combatant Commander**

The global war on terror in Latin America will require a dynamic and pro-active strategy specially tailored to keeping al-Qaida and other transnational threats from establishing an operational presence in the region. Latin America is al-Qaida's gateway to the United States. One could argue that Latin America is al-Qaida's "Ho Chi Minh Trail," a logistical and infiltration pipeline, that leads directly to the heart of everything al-Qaida wishes to destroy. Currently, given the economic and political situation in Latin America, this region can be described as critical to U.S. homeland security. Transnational and national terrorism coupled with drugs make the region highly susceptible to exploitation by Muslim extremists. USSC's TSCSG needs to address this weakness and counter the regions' vulnerabilities with a workable strategy that contains, destroys and deters future terrorist use of the region.

The Washington Post recently reported early January of 2003 that the "Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld has approved giving USSOCOM unprecedented authority to plan and fight the war on al-Qaida and other terrorist networks.,"<sup>21</sup> .."Staffs will plan and execute specific missions (by SOF) to kill or capture terrorists around the world."<sup>22</sup> If this

proposal becomes reality, USSC's strategy will be pivotal in integrating USSOCOM's assets to accomplish both commander's goals and objectives.

## **Recommendations**

Latin America requires a strategy written to specifically defeat the threat that al-Qaida and other terrorist organizations pose to the region. This strategy needs to be included as a separate and independent annex of USSC's TSCSG much in the same way as is Plan Colombia. Like Plan Colombia it should be a clear and well-defined interagency effort encompassing all instruments of national power. However, in addition to the interagency efforts, it should eliminate terrorists and their networks through the use of a predominately Latin American coalition trained and supported by the U.S. This approach requires USSC to use Coalition Warfare focused on combat operation in Colombia, the triborder area and then Peru. Within Colombia, forces OPCON to USSC have already trained and equipped a brigade size element. Based on U.S. Congressional restrictions, the brigade's operations had been limited to counterdrug missions. Recently, the U.S. Congress has given USSC "expanded authority" to use these assets for some non-counterdrug missions. They are fully trained and combat ready. Additionally, the Colombians have been provided with mobility in the form of UH-1's and UH-60 helicopters. Elements from this brigade would form the nucleus of a multinational brigade whose mission would be to provide the Organization of American States (OAS) with a high readiness force to defeat terrorism in the Western Hemisphere. While this recommendation would obviously require a stronger political commitment, USSC can begin the unit training and the organization of a coalition command and control structure prior to this commitment.

Additionally, Argentina is in the process of forming a Stand-by High Readiness Brigade similar to the European (SHIRBRIG) brigade. Argentina also is a Major Non-NATO Ally that participated in combat operations with the Desert Storm Coalition and Operation Enduring Freedom. However, the USG through USSC would have the lion's share of financing this brigade. The training of this brigade to combat terrorism could be programmed in USSC's TSCSG separate Terrorism Annex.

In addition to some boots on the ground, the USSC can provide increased C4I, planning, lift, and technology as well as a common operating picture (COP), interoperability and develop Intelligence Sharing Agreements to facilitate the exchange of information/intelligence transparently. One of the most important pieces for the USSC will be to strengthen the intelligence capabilities in the region.

In general, Latin America is an inward looking region with countries that are extremely focused on internal domestic issues as opposed to regional security issues. A part of USSC's strategy should be to shape and promote a more collective approach to the Latin American security environment. The USG should also accept offers of Latin American countries to participate in the WOT. Several countries volunteered forces to assist the USG in both combat and support roles in places like the Sinai, Bosnia or Kosovo. By accepting these offers Latin American countries will be assimilated into the WOT, assuming some ownership of the WOT and therefore with this vesting will come responsibility.

## **Conclusion**

The U.S. focus on the WOT does not necessarily match Latin Americans' focus. Even when both cite terrorism as their primary security issue, they may be concerned with different forms of terrorism. Homeland security is a common interest, but again may correspond on some issues while not others. Most Latin Americans understand that in the current U.S. security



environment of WOT, they are a less important geopolitical area. On the other hand, if they cooperate in WOT, they may expect to receive greater support for their own issues. It truly is possible to get a “buy-in” from Latin America if a concerted effort is made by the USG to include them.

The new NSS has placed the defeat of terrorism as our number one priority and the strategic importance of Latin America has significantly increased due to its geographical proximity of the U.S. USSC’s TSCSG needs to be revamped based on this new priority. A strategy currently predicated on security cooperation and peacetime engagement no longer adequately addresses the threat posed by terrorists to the security of the U.S. homeland. USSC strategy must be prepared to mitigate this threat and close our backdoor to terrorists.

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